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ABSTRACT

Mass literacy, largely the product of the nineteenth century European industrial revolution, may be considered in three facets. First, its sociology: human relationships are different when individuals can refer to permanent, written records than when they rely on a person-to-person transferral of information. Literacy also makes possible more complicated and different types of inquiry than is possible in non-literate cultures. Secondly, the cybernetics of literacy: it results in linearity in human thought processes with many side effects. Symbol-use has increased, making people more amenable to systems. Lastly, its political function: it is a mode of affiliation/exclusion used by elite groups to affiliate or exclude the non-elite in systems of ideas and their related institutions. Whether it represents an improvement is determined by the elite's concept of the nature of man, society, and good human institutions. Literacy has been one means for annexing men and their lives to ideologies, but there is an important distinction between partial and full affiliation. Literacy is not always welcomed by the governing elite because it also liberates while it annexes. (AG)

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# THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF LITERACY:

## SOCIOLOGY, CYBERNETICS, POLITICS

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# THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF LITERACY:

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Few independent histories of literacy have been written: the story of literacy's diffusion has been interwoven almost always with the general histories of education. With recent interest in social and economic development and the generative role being assigned by students of development to literacy in socio-economic development, historical reconstructions of the spread of literacy in different regions and cultures are beginning to appear and correlations between the spread of literacy and various indices of development in those cultures are being worked out. Cipolla's[1] recent book is one such example. There may be some others.

A global view of the history of literacy indicates some general trends that seem to be universal. First, that almost everywhere in the world literacy had been the monopoly of a highly selective religious and administrative elite. Literacy was, thus, a well-guarded province of the privileged. Second, that it took longer for literacy to spread between classes--from the aristocracy of the State and the church to the middle and lower classes--than it took to spread between cultural borders and continents. Third, that literacy spread more and more as administrative needs increased and commerce and trade expanded.

This third generalization is particularly important and pregnent with significance. It can help us understand that it is by no means unexplainable as to why mass literacy is a 19th and 20th century phenomenon and also a European phenomenon. This is apparently so because the industrial revolution came to

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[1] Carlos M. Cipolla, Literacy and Development in the West, Penguine Books, 1969.

Europe and it created technologies both of mass production and of modern armies and navies. Commerce expanded, proselytization increased, and colonies were won. All these three phenomena created colossal needs for literate functionaries and thus 'opened' western societies to more and more people for instrumental roles at home and abroad for the good of the State, the church, and commerce. For these roles, literacy was needed and literacy expanded. Conversely, the East without its industrial revolution, without its colonies, without its preferred world-wide commercial role, and without the opportunity to proselytize, did not need functionaries who were literate. Indeed, under colonization the indigenous systems of literacy, in most colonies, broke down for lack of status and support. Literacy regressed under colonization.

So much for the history of the diffusion of literacy. The more important consideration for a social scientist, however, is not the history of literacy, but its nature and its present or potential social function. To these questions we will address ourselves in the following.

## II

### The Nature of Literacy

It is more than 5,000 years ago that writing, the instrument of literate human culture, was invented. However, human civilizations everywhere have taken literacy so much for granted and have been so overwhelmed by it that little serious attention has been given to understanding the nature and function of literacy, and whatever little is known is intuitive and tentative. What does literacy do to our mentalities, to our modes of information handling, to our processes of thought, view of reality, social interactions, and indeed, to our societies?

The mass media--the radio, film, and T.V.--much more recent in birth, have received much greater attention. In discussions of the nature and function of media, some light has been thrown obliquely on the nature and function of literacy.

Marshall McLuhan's assertions about the nature of media are well-known[1] though considered, at least controversial, and often extravagant and silly. Writing to communicate, distribute or store, that became part of popular culture with the invention of the movable type, is considered, by McLuhan, to have introduced linear thinking in science and mathematics, linear developments in music, self-centeredness in man, fragmentation in human society, and national chauvinism everywhere. With the invention of the electronic media, and the reassertion of the ear in receiving sensory messages, things are changing again and some profound things are happening to our civilization. The sense of participation provided by low-definition and cool T.V. medium is returning man to his tribal consciousness and turning the world into a global village.

To understand the nature of literacy, one must deal with it at two levels: what has it done to societies and collectivities, and what has it done to individuals?

The Sociology of Literacy

A sociological analysis of literacy is presented in a recent important work edited by Jack Goody[2]. He points to the sociological role of literacy:

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[1]See Raymond Rosenthal (ed.), McLuhan: Pro and Con, Pelican, 1968.

[2]See Jack Goody (ed.), Literacy in Traditional Societies, Cambridge: At the University Press, 1968, 350 Pages.

in empire-building by keeping the center linked to the periphery; in commerce by enabling traders to calculate, record, and promote profit; in making religion and law universalistic even though rigid because of objectification.

The basic differences between simple non-literate and traditional cultures and more complex literate cultures, is described, thus, by him:

> In oral societies the cultural tradition is transmitted almost entirely by face-to-face communication; and changes in its content are accompanied by the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant. Literate societies, on the other hand, cannot discard, absorb, or transmute the past in the same way. Instead, their members are faced with permanently recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set apart from the present, historical inquiry becomes possible. This in turn encourages scepticism; and scepticism, not only about the legendary past, but about received ideas about the universe as a whole. From here the next step is to see how to build up and to test alternative explanations; and out of this there arose the kind of logical, specialized, and cumulative intellectual tradition of sixth-century Ionia. The kinds of analysis involved in the syllogism, and in the outer forms of logical procedure, are clearly dependent upon writing, indeed upon a form of writing sufficiently simple and cursive to make possible widespread and habitual recourse both to the recording of verbal statements and then to the dissecting of them. It is probable that it is only the analytic process that writing itself entails, the written formalization of sounds and syntax, which make possible the habitual separating out into formally distinct units of the various cultural elements whose indivisible wholeness is the essential basis of the 'mystical participation' which Levy-Bruhl regards as characteristic of the non-literate peoples.[1]

Kathleen Gough, however, cautions, and rightly:

> Literacy is for the most part an enabling rather than a causal factor, making possible the development of complex political structures, syllogistic reasoning, scientific inquiry, linear conceptions of reality, scholarly specialization, artistic elaboration, and perhaps certain kinds of individualism and alienation. Whether, and to what extent, these will in fact develop depends apparently on concomitant factors of ecology, inter-societal relations, and internal

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[1]Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in Jack Goody (ed.), op. cit., pages 67-68.

ideological and social structural responses to these.[1]

It is also pointed out that literate and non-literate cultures are not pure forms, one mystical, the other rational and syllogistic; for after all, writing has been an addition not a total alternative to oral transmission of culture.

Literacy--Its Cybernetics

What literacy does to social systems is, of course, mediated through the individuals in those social systems. It is often asserted by cultural anthropologists and cultural linguists that man is participating in his own making and that literacy, a special tool of symbolic transformation of reality, is playing an important deterministic role in structuring the mentalities of all those who learn to read and write. The literature[2] in this area, of what we might call the cybernetics of literacy, is widely spread out, but some common-sense generalizations can be suggested.

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[1]Kathleen Gough, "Literacy in Kerala," Jack Goody (ed.), op. cit., page 153.

[2]Cassirer, E. (1955). The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, New Haven;

Childe, V.G. (1941). Man Makes Himself, London;

Diringer, D. (1948). The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind, London & New York;

Diringer, D. (1962). Writing, London;

Gelb, I.J. (1952). A Study of Writing. Chicago;

Henle, P. (1958). Language, Thought, and Culture, Ann Arbor, Michigan;

Whorf, B.L. (1956). Language, Thought and Reality, New York.

Since literacy means reading words in sequences and writing messages formed of ideas linearly organized, the linearity in the human thought processes as a consequence of literacy has been mentioned again and again in literature. It follows from the acceptance of the linearity hypothesis that the atonceness in thought, vision, and response has been partially lost to man in literate cultures. This has meant that the mystical and even the wholistic has been underplayed. The magical has lost ground to the syllogistic and the rational. Again, since speech and writing (as reflection of thought) have been seen as composed of words and phrases, the analytic in human cultures has been endorsed. This has resulted in deeper understanding of the part-whole paradigm, of the relationships between parts that make wholes --sociological wholes, political wholes, economic wholes. In other words, it has become possible for man to analyze his own situation; to understand man-in-society, man-in-universe, and since he has developed causal thinking, he has become more sociological, less religious. This means new understandings and new freedoms.

Man is a symbol user; that is what makes him human. In his pre-literate existence, he was using symbols only orally--he didn't read and he didn't write. With the coming of literacy, man has become a better, more efficient symbol user--clearly he now has symbol using efficiency in more than one dimension. This has made him, in the language of communication, a better user of information, a better handler of information. This has given the literate individuals, we suggest, at the same time greater freedom <u>and</u> subjugation within 'alien' systems. Information handling helps to cope with ideas and through rational strategies to use options, but, at the same time, paradoxically this involves 'subjugation' to some selected ideology. This liberating

(rational) and subjugating (affiliative) nature of literacy is what we consider a fascinating characteristic. Literacy structures and programs a human mind. It networks an individual into an outside network of a system of ideas while at the same time structuring the circuitry within and providing antennas for better reception from various channels.

This aspect of the cybernetics of literacy, it appears to me, is then the most significant. It makes people more amenable to systems--of administration, army, economic organization. It makes it easier for teachers and propagandists to reach and effect the literate--except that the literate now also has a shield he can use, of rationality.

Empirical research by implication supports the preceding ideas on the cybernetics of literacy. Literate workers and farmers consume even more information from media, have willingness to change, show awareness of alternatives, and opportunities, and have a sense of political identity.[1]

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[1]Howard Schuman, Alex Inkeles, and David H. Smith, "Some Social Psychological Effects and Non-effects of Literacy in a New Nation," Economic Development and Cultural Change, 16, No. 1, (October, 1967), 1-4;

Everett M. Rogers, and William Herzog, "Functional Literacy Among Colombian Peasants," Economic Development and Cultural Change, XIV, No. 2, (January, 1966);

Daniel Lerner, "Literacy and Initiative in Village Development," Rural Development Research Report, MIT Center for International Studies, 1965;

S.A. Rahim, "Diffusion and Adoption of Agricultural Practices: A Study of Communication, Diffusion, and Adoption of Improved Agricultural Practices in a Village in East Pakistan" (Comilla: Pakistan Academy for Village Development, 1961).

III

Literacy--Its Political Function

In the preceding sections we have indicated that literacy is a double-edged weapon--while it liberates, it at the same time subjugates by affiliating individuals to elite ideas and ideologies. The literate thus may be programed into production and marketing systems, systems of organized violence (that is the armed forces), into institutions and social systems of various kinds with different functions. This process of affiliation into systems does not mean a total loss of freedom and no gain. Depending upon the value systems upon which those systems have been created, further options open, new freedoms become available while interdependences arise and many choices are surrendered. No man is an island. The literate man is even less of an island. He is thrown into a situation where he must deal, must transact.

Political Function of Literacy

In a recent paper, the present author discussed the socio-political function of literacy. Literacy was seen as a mode of affiliation/exclusion used by elite groups to affiliate or exclude the non-elite in regard to systems of ideas, and institutions resulting from those systems of ideas.[1]

The argument is essentially as follows.

In the larger historical movement called cultural action, elite groups of various kinds play the basic role in initiating cultural action. It is not to say that some segments of the masses are not invited to participate in cul-

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[1]H.S. Bhola, "Notes Towards a Theory of Cultural Action as Elite Initiatives in Affiliation/Exclusion," a paper prepared for the institute on educational change, namely, Planned Educational Change--Issues and Directions, Indiana University, directed by the author during Fall, 1971, Mimeographed, 46 Pages.

tural action as instruments of such cultural action or to be subjects of such cultural action. Nor is it intended to be said that such cultural action does not 'liberate' the masses." All this indeed does happen. Segments of the masses are recruited by the elite to multiply themselves. There is, of course, recruitment of clerks, sailors, and soldiers, and assembly line workers. And there are those that are annexed to be the bricks and mortar in the grand social and political designs inherent in the elite systems of ideas and the institutions that those ideas generate.

As indicated, the annexation of the masses by the elite to their systems of ideas do not result in total subjugation. It often can mean liberation from an existing cycle of poverty, and of lack of privilege. It can bring, at the same time, mobility in the new system with newer status, newer rewards, and new experiencing of power. The basic question, then, is of the system of ideas, the ideology that the influential elite at a particular time of history, happen to be propagating. What is their concept of the nature of man, of the nature of society, and the nature of good human institutions?

The elite may be distinguished from the fact that they either generate themselves or subscribe to a comprehensive system of ideas. More specifically, they must have the following attributes: (a) A system of ideas that they have invented or subscribe to--the higher the elite level (and we will discuss the levels of elite hierarchies), the greater is ideological self-consciousness; (b) A hightened desire to experience power through an active commitment to their chosen ideology--active commitment need not, of course, mean overt action or agitation; (c) Ability to organize and actualize their ideological systems.

There are various types of elites in any culture. Susan Keller[1] suggests

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[1]Susan Keller, "Elites," International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, (David L. Sills, ed.), The Macmillan Co., 1968, Vol. 5, pages 26-28.

two general categories: the strategic elite and the segmental elite. The strategic elite have influence and power that is most comprehensive in scope and impact. These are what are generally called the power elite, and sometimes, the organizing elite or the directing elite. The segmental elite, on the other hand, hold power that is exercised within specialized segments of the society--arts, sciences, commerce, education.

But, more importantly, from the point of view of our discussion, there are elite hierarchies. There are the absolute elite, "those considering themselves subject to no control or check except outside circumstances", and there are the authorized elite, "those claiming authority to exercise power on behalf of someone else or some group for the purpose of achieving results determined or desired by them".[1] To this may be added a third, and numerically, and even perhaps functionally, the most important category--the instrumental elite.[2]

The absolute elite multiply themselves by recruiting authorized elite who, to create organizations and systems to fulfil elite systems of ideas, recruit instrumental elite. Instrumental elite are almost always, and historically speaking have always had, some kind of literacy, however rudimentary.

As should have come through the preceding discussion, cultural action does not stop with absolute elite recruiting authorized elite and the authorized elite recruiting instrumental elite to create systems and organizations. Very often the more important stage of cultural action begins there. Organization for what? That is, what systems of ideas are being sought to be actualized? What is the blueprint of the Utopia beings sought? What is the new myth about Man, and society that the particular elite group is seeking to bring on earth? For that

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[1] Adolf A. Berle, Power, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World Inc., 1967, page 95.

[2] See H.S. Bhola, Notes Towards etc., op. cit.

will determine what segments of masses will be annexed to the elite system? With what principles of selectivity? At what speed, and at what cost?

We propose the view that in this annexation of the non-elite to the elite system of ideas, literacy plays an important part. Literacy is the vehicle that has carried the vision of the Missionary or fulfilled the mission of the political visionary. Literacy has sought to annex men and their lives to ideologies in the books and the manifestos.

Literacy is by no means the only mode of affiliation. Army is the oldest, most effective mode of affiliation. Religion is another. The Factory and the School are two more recent, but historically the most important ones. Enfranchisement is yet another mode of affiliation. And lastly, an invention of the last three decades, development extension is yet another mode of affiliation. Literacy as a mode of affiliation may be seen to overlap the school and the developmental extension as modes. We might indicate here that these modes of affiliation are not necessarily used in pure forms, but are, of course, often used in synergetic relationship. Also, one must remember that all these modes, while they are used to affiliate, some do, at the same time, exclude some others --individuals, communities, groups, and peoples. They are thus, at the same time, modes of both affiliation and exclusion. Literacy, it should follow, is also a mode both of affiliation and exclusion.

The failure to see this socio-political role of literacy in cultural action, change, and development, brings many to dismay when they fail to see why adults to whom literacy is offered are not motivated, why some programs fail, and why some seem to succeed.

These questions can be successfully tackled by considering another concept, that of full and partial affiliation. Full affiliation may be defined

as membership that offers three kinds of rewards: economic; social, that is of status; of opportunities for exercising or experiencing power. Partial affiliation, of course, would be that offering only partial rewards: of status without feeling of power, or power without any economic rewards.

What do those who talk of literacy as a human right offer in terms of full or partial affiliation? What are their ideologies?

Quite often the ideologies are rather mushy. They offer 'humanity' without bread. Or they offer verbs without votes, and the right to read without the right to rebel. One should see here that those things go together. Partial affiliation is not attractive or is attractive only in the short run. That is why literacy that only offers humanity without bread is rejected except by some old men and women in search of improving chances in a second world or a rare individual who begins to enjoy reading--enjoy experiencing power of knowing--and who is dancing to a different drummer.

While hardly any literacy worker that I know looks at literacy from the perspective we suggest, they have, by trial and error and intuitively, landed pretty close: they are relating, in their programs, literacy with family planning or literacy with greater economic rewards. This is indeed the rationale behind the Unesco concept of work-oriented literacy which we will discuss in greater detail later on in the book and which we think has chances of succeeding better because it provides, in one package, economic rewards: partial but attractive affiliation since economic deprivations are the most acutely felt in all parts of the Third World.

The most attractive experience in this connection is Paulo Freire's approach to literacy. He does not indeed talk of full or partial affiliation. On the contrary, he wants no affiliations, no impositions, no directives, but

a native awareness, a free inquiry born of dialogic action leading to man's ontological vocation: to understand reality and to act to change it without oppression. A radical humanist's dream! But, while he builds a case as beautiful as dew on flower petals for self-generated freedom, for understanding of the reality surrounding our lives, for some unobstrusive almost absent 'leader' that helps us do it without domesticating us, it does not add up to any theory of social action.

Paulo Freire's own practical work has been wiser than his words as written in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed[1]. His literacy work in Brazil had enough content, structure, and direction as to frighten the government of Brazil and to have Freire thrown out of the country.

The government of Brazil understood the real nature of Freire's work which was to act as a contending elite to challenge the existing elite and the ideologies they upheld. This contending elite group (Freire articulating it if not leading it) went around annexing Indians and offering them not just the Bible and a better deal in the next world, or even higher production in the field and better health, but a taste of power--to engage in the ontological vocation of understanding reality, of acting on it to overthrow the oppresser. What Freire was doing, then, was to offer full affiliation (political power, with status, and economic rewards following) to people who were and had been kept purposely on the periphery.

Freire's concept and approach when allowed to be followed and when engineered into a sizeable cultural action, would be the most sensible approach, for it does offer the underprivileged groups an opportunity for full affiliation. But, where

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[1]Paulo Freire's The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Herder and Herder, 1971. Also see Paulo Freire's, "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1970 (Pages 205-225).

the elite in power do not think that there is enough for everyone to go around and where they are deliberately holding the sluice gates down to slow down the flow of the underprivileged into the elite system for reasons of scarcity or ideology, it would not work. In those systems, the more 'reactionary' approach of Unesco--functional literacy or work-oriented literacy--would be effective, in fact even permitted. We call this approach 'reactionary' because we think it is partial affiliation, but a partial affiliation that is attractive to people living with economic deprivations and scarcities. This approach provides not only more money and food to the farmer, but also more to the elite system for them to get foreign exchange and then to buy the elitist toys they all seem to need so very much.

The discussion need not suggest that we are, then, against literacy or against functional literacy. We have indicated that the elite are the initiators of cultural actions. We have said that they have systems of ideas which they want to actualize and for which they fight and organize. But, during the last 50 years or more, these systems of ideas have been favorable to the common man. Freedoms have been imposed on the common man! and while the non-elite toilers have been annexed, they have been rewarded too.

Literacy particularly is a mode which liberates as it annexes. It is generative in character. It opens the minds of men in ways that are beginning to become clear only now. And, therefore, literacy has been a double-edged weapon. It liberated while it annexed.

There are voices that consider efforts at literacy as reactionary[1]--they consider it as an inefficient tool of affiliating the underprivileged into the

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[1]Neil Postman, "The Politics of Reading," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 40, No. 2, May 1970, Pages

system and suggest that we now have the multi-media which should be used instead if we are really interested in opening up the system quickly and urgently to those who so far have been out of it.

Some even think literacy should be discarded. It is hot. It is rigid. It postpones and it misses the atonceness of the T.V. Literacy workers have not yet taken this advice!